

VZCZCXRO0808
PP RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHNP RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHSI #2269/01 3431327
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 081327Z DEC 08
FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0527
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 TBILISI 002269

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/18/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [RU](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: IMPOSSIBLE TO GOVERN WITHOUT GOD AND BIBLE

REF: A. 04 TBILISI 3003

[1](#)B. 04 TBILISI 3001

[1](#)C. 05 TBILISI 1298

[1](#)D. 06 TBILISI 112

[1](#)E. 04 TBILISI 763

[1](#)F. 07 TBILISI 2558

[1](#)G. 07 TBILISI 3065

[1](#)H. 04 TBILISI 3301

[1](#)I. 05 TBILISI 2420

[1](#)J. 05 TBILISI 2418

[1](#)K. 08 TBILISI 2117

[1](#)L. 08 TBILISI 1983

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Georgian Orthodox Church is a inherent part of Georgian society and for many, defines what it is to be Georgian. For those who are not ethnic Georgian, this close association threatens disenfranchisement. Most Georgians, even if not fervent parishioners, would not openly contradict the church. This holds true as well in political circles. The church adeptly manages a juggling act between majority and minority political parties, supporting, cajoling and reprimanding when appropriate. In the last year, Georgia has weathered turbulent times: large civil unrest, widely disputed elections, and invasion by Russian troops. In each of these instances, Ilia II, Patriarch of Georgia was active in steering rudderless Georgians towards stiller waters. Ilia II himself is an astute diplomat who has an active interest in internal politics, especially in the status of church jurisdiction over the two separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He travels to Russia within this context but also meets with other regional political leaders.

The internal relationship between church and state is symbiotic; the external relationship with leaders of other faiths sometimes is strained as the conservative elements of the Orthodox faith attempt to maintain and broaden influence amongst their followers. End Summary.

The Shepherd and His Flock

[1](#)2. (U) Ilia II is the current Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia and the spiritual leader of the Georgian Orthodox Church. He was born Irakli Gudushauri-Shiolashvili in Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia, Russia. Last year, he celebrated 30 years as the Catholicos-Patriarch. Ilia II is a descendant of an influential eastern Georgian mountainous clan with family ties to the former royal dynasty of the Bagrationi. Ilia II trained in Russia and served in a variety of positions before assuming his current post. In 1967, he was consecrated Bishop of Sukhumi and Abkhazia and elevated to the rank of metropolitan. He served in that position for 11 years. After he was elected the new Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia in 1977, he began a course of reforms, enabling the Georgian Orthodox Church, once suppressed by Soviet ideology to regain its former influence by the 1980s. During the last years of the Soviet Union, he joined protesters in Tbilisi against communist rule on April 8, 1989, and unsuccessfully

urged protesters to disperse before Soviet troops arrived. During the civil wars in the 1990s, he called on rival parties to find a peaceful solution to the crisis. From 1978-1983, Ilia II was the Co-President of the World Council of Churches (WCC).

The Ties That Bind

13. (C) Georgian Orthodoxy has regained popularity since Soviet times. This resurgence has raised the question of the role of the church and has pitted "conservatives" against "reformers." In July 2003, an open letter signed by forty-two public figures voicing concern over ties that had been broken between society and the Georgian Orthodox Church was sent to the Patriarch (ref A). The letter called for Ilia II to "resist the increased radicalism and xenophobia" and urged him to voice concern over the violation of religious minorities' rights. The reformist elements within the church, then supported by civil society NGOs and the Ombudsman, claimed the church was teaching fanaticism; had corrupt ties to scrap-metal, alcohol and cigarette businesses; and was infiltrated by Russian agents (Ref B). Allegations of the Patriarch's strong ties to Russia are manifest due to his place of birth, Russia-based theological education, and strong contact with the Russian Patriarchy. Conservative priests accused civil society and NGOs of interfering in the internal affairs of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC). GOC watchers ruminate that these conservative elements surrounding Ilia II keep him from settling the church property disputes between the GOC and the Armenian Apostolic Church (Ref C). The Saakashvili administration's

TBILISI 00002269 002 OF 004

stance has been to remain aloof from these disputes, although it took on a decisive role in responding to abuse of other religious faiths (Ref, U.S. State Department's Human Rights Report for Georgia, 2006, 2007.)

My Peace I Give You

14. (C) The Patriarch is a positive force who has admirably defused, on more than several occasions, potentially dangerous situations before they became uncontrollable. In 2004, the Patriarch played a positive role in the Ajaran stand-off between President Saakashvili and Aslan Abashidze (Ref E). In November 2007, he urged calm after large scale public unrest resulted in the injury of protesters and policemen alike; on the first anniversary of the event, he repeated this call. In March 2008, he urged opposition candidates to cease their hungerstrike when they cried foul on Presidential election results and to resume dialogue with the government. (Comment: After dialogue failed to break the impasse, both opposition and authorities blamed each other for what they called "a failure to heed the Patriarch's appeal.") In August 2008, Ilia II traveled to Gori through Russian occupation lines to retrieve dead soldiers' remains, after appealing to Aleksey II, the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, to mediate his access. Gori was then under the control of Russian and South Ossetian forces. Ilia II often uses the pulpit to call for Georgian unity, such as the September Human Chain "Stop Russia" exhortation, which turned out thousands of Georgians in a scene of solidarity across the country.

Cast in Thy Lot Amongst Us

15. (C) A constitutional agreement (Concordat) signed by the president and the Orthodox Patriarch in 2005 gives the church legal status. It also gives the church a unique consultative role in the government. Association with the church is known to be a politically successful pairing, regardless of party affiliation, and attacks on the church

can be damaging. Sozar Subari, Ombudsman, who dared to be openly critical of the church's Concordat, was dressed down by Orthodox officials for suggesting it made other religions less equal. Papal Nuncio Claudio Gugerotti told post shortly after this incident, that revoking the Concordat would cause a public outcry that could jeopardize the stability of the government (Ref D). "If the people are forced to choose," he said, "they will choose the church over the government. The U.S. could easily be seen as the force behind the proposed revocation." Since Georgia's independence in 1991, the Patriarch's role in domestic politics has become increasingly more salient. It was the Patriarch who baptized Eduard Shevardnadze, then President, in a highly symbolic gesture of christening the long time communist leader. The gesture demonstrated the Patriarch's support for the new authorities of the country, and with the advent of the Rose Revolution, even stronger support for the new leader, Mikheil Saakashvili. The Patriarch blessed Saakashvili when he was first elected in 2004 and then re-elected in 2008. On both occasions the Patriarch symbolically led the ceremony at the tombs of Georgia's highly esteemed monarchs, David the Builder and Bagrat III, both known for their successful efforts to unify the country. The Patriarch's presence is noted at many of President Saakashvili's public addresses and recognized by name in Saakashvili's opening remarks. The Patriarch regularly attends the May 26 National Day military parade standing next to the President. Conversely, Saakashvili can be seen with other members of his cabinet attending Sunday sermons.

16. (C) Opposition candidates court the church's endorsement, even the more radical elements such as Kakha Kukava of the Conservative Party. In May, Kukava said, "The new chairman of the Central Election Commission should be respected and a trusted person--and here we can also listen to the Patriarch and his recommendation for who this person can be." The Christian Democrat Movement (CDM), set up by Giorgi Targamadze in February 2008, saw the potential of basing a political party around the church's values as a unifying factor. As one of only two opposition parties to pass the threshold in May 21 Parliamentary elections, his platform--based on "protecting Georgian Orthodox Christianity"--has been successful. The CDM has vowed to initiate an amendment in Parliament that would declare the Orthodox Christianity an "official religion" in Georgia. The CDM website lists amongst its major principles belief in God and moral values, and that distancing politics from moral values is unacceptable. In October 2007, the Patriarch called for the abolition of the republic in favor of a constitutional monarchy. Two of the opposition candidates

TBILISI 00002269 003 OF 004

adopted this as part of their platform, most notably the New Rightist Party, which dedicated a press conference to the issue. Insiders who know New Rightists leader David Gamkrelidze maintain that it was not the political parties seizing the idea from the Patriarch, but the other way around (Ref F,G).

The Prodigal Territories -----

17. (C) Public opinion polls underline that territorial integrity is among the top three concerns of most citizens. President Saakashvili made return of the de facto territories a key part of his election platform in 2004. Georgian Orthodox Church representatives are active on the diplomatic front with regards to the practical jurisdiction of the GOC in the de facto territories, even more so now that Russia has recognized their independence. A Georgian delegation from the church met with the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Aleksey II in Moscow November 6-10, 2008. Zurab Abashidze, former Georgian Ambassador to Russia and member of the delegation which went to Moscow, told Emboffs that the Russian Patriarchy had offered to hold religious services in

both territories until Georgian priests would be allowed there. The Georgians declined this offer. The Georgian Church maintains that the Russian Church will let in other religions to the de facto territories, but not the Georgian Patriarchy, and see this as encroaching upon their domain. Georgian media coverage was positive of the Moscow visit, but did not offer many details.

18. (C) Excommunicated priest Basil Kobakhidze conducted a seminar on the subject at the Caucasus House to analyze the results of the visit. Kobakhidze was excommunicated from the church in 2004 for his reformist leanings (Ref H). Kobakhidze outlined several factors which indicated to him that the Russian Orthodox Church is well on its way to ingratiating itself within the perceived Georgian flock in the territories. First, the subordination of de facto church officials indicate their loyalty is to Russia: the de facto Alania Eparchy of South Ossetia is headed by Father Giorgi Pukhate who has close personal ties to Kokoity. Allegedly, Abkhazia is under the supervision of Father Kupov, Bishop of Maikop ad Adigea Eparchy of the Russian Federation. The Sukhumi Eparchy itself is under the leadership of Father Besarion Aplia, who is under the direct control of Moscow. In 2002 and 2008, the Russian church openly decorated Father Aplia with special awards. Aplia has a representative office in Moscow. Secondly, there is an ongoing flurry of Russian Orthodox Church activity: millions spent on charity activities; mobilizing funds for the construction of an Orthodox Cathedral in Tskhinvali; and conducting memorial services for Russian soldiers who fell on the battlefield in August. Kobakhidze opined that while the Russian Church will try to maintain control over Orthodox Churches in breakaway regions of Georgia, it will not recognize its jurisdiction. This could be due to fears that the Orthodox Churches in Latvia, Lithuania, and Ukraine may also demand independence which eventually could be recognized by Constantinople.

Faith of Our Fathers

19. (C) The relationship between the GOC and other religious denominations is at times rocky. The concordat is a thorny issue, especially for the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC). AAC officials claim that the concordat gives special treatment to the GOC that other religions do not receive. Churches other than the GOC must register as a local QChurches other than the GOC must register as a local association or as a foundation. The AAC has refused to do so, arguing that it opens itself up to the Government of Georgia's determination as to what and what is not a religious body. (Embassy note: On the other hand, the Roman Catholic Church in Georgia has chosen to register as an NGO, the association of St. Joseph, and therefore must pay taxes as other organizations do. Both the AAC and the Roman Catholics have complained to the Embassy about this "unfair practice" and urged the USG to take action. End note.) Indeed, AAC has been lobbying for years for the resolution of Armenian properties, so far without result. AAC Priest Narek Kushyan blames the government for the "lack of will" in resolving the problem. GOG officials such as Minister of Reintegration Temuri Yakobshvili are sympathetic, but see the issue as one into which the government should not intrude. As he told Kushyan, "I just can't call up Interior Minister Vano (Merabishvili) and tell him to fix it."

110. (C) The GOC withdrew from the WCC in 1997 due to disagreements over the proposal that the organization take on a more ecclesiastical nature. According to Giorgi Andiradze, former director of Patriarchy Television Iveria, there was

TBILISI 00002269 004 OF 004

pressure from priests who claimed that GOC should be independent from all other churches, as the GOC is the only true church. Ilia II apparently succumbed to this pressure. The GOC can rally its congregation to mass when it feels threatened by other religions. Such was the case in 2003

when President Shevardnadze yielded to the pressure of the church and refused to sign an agreement with the Vatican. The document, which was to set up an interstate agreement with the Vatican, was expected to be signed on September 20, 2003. Several thousand protesters gathered in front of the Parliament to protest the agreement. Ilia II himself at the time said in press statements, "This agreement will cause serious problems for the Georgian government." Press articles indicated that the GOC felt that the agreement with the Vatican would threaten the GOC's exclusive status in Georgia. Andiradze maintains that the proposed agreement had not been discussed with the GOC ahead of time. When the Union of Orthodox Parents perceived the Catholic Relief Services USAID-funded youth program, Building for the Future, as proselytizing activity, they protested in front of the U.S. and Vatican Embassies in Tbilisi holding signs reading "Stop Catholic Expansion" and "The Vatican is a Spiritual Aggressor." (Ref I, J).

Go Forth and Spread the News

11. (C) Anecdotal evidence indicates the GOC may be gearing up efforts to widen its spiritual presence in Georgia. Emboffs visited a monastery which is being built near the Russian-Georgian border at Kazbegi. Border guards who work at the post told Emboffs that the facility is being built by volunteers and funded by private donations. Due to the harsh climate and short construction season in Kazbegi it is estimated that it will take 20 years to complete the main church and all the out-buildings. It is already in its fourth year of construction. According to the Border Police, the Patriarch feels it important to have a monastery near the border because it shows that not only will the GoG protect Georgian citizens and villagers, but that the church is there to protect them as well. (Comment: Although the Patriarch was born in Vladikavkaz, he grew up and spent his childhood in the Kazbegi region. End Comment.) Kazbegi Border Police had heard that the Patriarch would like other churches and monasteries built at other borders as well. (Emboffs heard this as well in the Lagodeki district near the Azerbaijan border.) According to a source close to the Patriarch, in the near future the Patriarchy intends to open its own TV Channel, designed to air conversations with spiritual leaders, sermons, and programs about the history and activities of the church. The channel, which will be a further means of outreach to the Georgian population, could be a powerful tool to leverage public opinion, including on political issues. According to the same source, Iveria which currently airs some religious programming is not owned by the church and will stop broadcasts.

12.(C) The Turkish Consul in Batumi, Thugrul Ozten, told Emboffs that he had heard of mass baptisms in Ajara amongst the Turkish-speaking population and that church officials had been accompanied by government Deputy Ministers. Ozten sees a parallel between the growth in Georgian nationalism and support for the Georgian Church. He drew on his own country's parallel with the struggle between religion and state, and opined that the Turkish-speaking population perceives that they would be marginalized if they did not have strong ties between them and the GOC (Ref K).

Comment

13. (C) Comment: The Georgian Orthodox Church is an influential and invaluable ally of the Saakashvili administration. Given the church's strong emphasis on traditional values, this traditional conservatism could conceivably clash with future government priorities if the church would find them unacceptable. Some such as former PM Gurgenidze see the Georgian church as an unstoppable force and anti-western (Ref L). For the moment the church is very supportive of NATO and EU integration, but if this should change, particularly when Ilia II's replacement takes office, it could present a formidable opponent to those in power and

have a major influence on Georgia's foreign policy.
TEFFT